

Swami Nirmalanadaji Maharaj
and Sri Ramakrishna Niranjan Ashrama



TULASEETEERTHAN



SWAMI NIRMALANANDA (Tulasi Maharaj)

(23rd December 1863 - 26th April 1938)

It is seventy years now since Swami Nirmalanandaji Maharaj known among the Ramakrishnites as Tulasi Maharaj, entered *mahāsamādhi* at his favourite Niranjan Ashrama here at Ottapalam. One wonders whether the present generation of devotees is familiar enough with his life of renunciation and service. How can one describe the Swamiji and his mission in life? He was, to put it in a nutshell, one of the seventeen monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who gave up their all and formed themselves into a brotherhood of monks under the leadership of Swami Vivekananda for self-realisation and for the welfare of the world. His life of seventy five summers can be summed up as follows:

He was born in Calcutta on the 23rd of December 1863 in the 'Dutt' family of the 'Kāyastha' community to which belonged Swami Vivekananda as well. He was given the name 'Tulasi Charan' as it was believed that he was born as the fruit of his mother's worship of the sacred Tulasi. He



completed his school studies in Benares under the guardianship of his maternal uncle and returned to Calcutta for higher studies. He became a student of the Calcutta University in 1881 after passing the Entrance examination with distinction. It was about this time - late 1881 or early 1882 - that Tulasi had the great good fortune of meeting Sri Ramakrishna 'Paramahamsa' for the first time. Subsequently, he visited Dakshineswar a few times when he could sit at the feet of the God-intoxicated Saint and converse with Him. Shortly afterwards, Sri Ramakrishna was gracious enough to be Tulasi's 'go-between' (*guru*), blessing him with spiritual initiation and accepting him as His disciple. For the next four years or so, Tulasi used to frequent Dakshineswar to listen to Him and serve Him till His *mahāsamādhi* in 1886.

Coming under the influence of Swami Vivekananda, Tulasi joined the Baranagore monastery and received from him *sanyāsa* and the monastic name, NIRMALANANDA. He spent three years in the monastery doing all sorts of work for the up-keep of the place, serving his brother disciples and doing *sādhana*. Then he left for the holy Himalayas to practise intense *tapasya*, "to charge my spiritual battery", as he put it. For about 12 years from 1889 to 1902, he was on the Himalayan heights except when he visited the monastery for short periods. For example, when Swami Vivekananda returned to India in 1897, Tulasi Maharaj was there to receive him. He spent months with the leader, serving him and getting educated and trained by him in order to become a worthy member of the new order of monks.



Again, when the Belur Math was established in 1889, Tulasi Maharaj was there at the centre of its activities. He was unanimously elected as the Trustee and Assistant Secretary. He was also the *āchārya* along with Swami Turiyanandaji Maharaj to teach and train the young *brahmacharins* of the Math. However, he left the Math after a short time when he could no longer resist the call of the Himalayas. He returned to the Math when he received the sad news of the passing away of his all-in-all, Swami Vivekananda, in 1902. From then onwards till his own passing away in 1938, his sole mission in life was to spread the message of his Master with singular devotion and self-denying ardour. Truly, he was Sri Ramakrishna's "*Kāka-bhusundi*", for it was Tulasi Maharaj who had taken His message to the people everywhere for the longest time.

From 1903 to 1906, the scene of his missionary work was New York in America where he did wonderful work - lecturing, teaching Indian philosophy and Sanskrit and training earnest souls in meditation, organising Ramakrishna-Vivekananda birthday celebrations and so on. However, he was called back to India "for the regeneration of the motherland". Swamiji was sent as President of the Bangalore ashrama to breathe new life into its nearly defunct activities. Thus, from 1909 onwards till his last days, South India became the main field of his missionary activity, and in a way, Bangalore became the unofficial head-quarters of the mission as well as the radiating centre of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda message in the South.



It was Swami Nirmalananda who spiritually awakened South India, Kerala in particular, with the life-giving message of neo-Vedanta. He it was who pioneered the Ramakrishna movement in Kerala and built up the Temple of Sri Ramakrishna from its strong foundation to its shining spires. For over a quarter century, he worked with untired feet and unwearied heart for Kerala, visiting the place more than once every year even when important work of the mission used to call him away to North India. At the time of Swamiji's first visit to Kerala in 1911, there was no Ramakrishna ashrama, *brahmacharin* or *sanyasin* and no organisational work for building up the movement here. But at the time of the Swamiji's *mahāsamādhi* in 1938, there were 16 ashramas, 32 *sanyasins* and as many *brahmacharins* besides a large number of householder disciples and devotees around each ashrama.

Again, it was Swami Nirmalananda who started the publication of *Prabuddha-Keralam*, the Malayalam organ of the mission on the auspicious Vijaya-Dasami Day in 1915. It was owing to the great concern of Swamiji for the devotees in Kerala that Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj agreed to a month-long visit to this part of the land which raised tidal waves of spirituality wherever he went. Thousands were fortunate to have his *darshan* and a few blessed souls to receive initiation from the God-centred spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna. This was no small or easy achievement which no other State in India could lay claim to.

Nor did it just happen by way of an accident. It was caused, brought about by the systematic work of Tulasi Maharaj over the years in spite of his advancing age and



failing health. Often, he had to travel by carts and country boats and even on foot to reach the remote villages. No wonder then, that the Ramakrishna movement in Kerala ranked second only to that in Bengal, which was solely due to the magnetic personality of Tulasi Maharaj that inspired a band of dedicated workers at every centre.

We have already seen that Tulasi Maharaj was an awakener of souls. But he was also an expert physician who administered the shock treatment to cure the 'lunatic asylum', Kerala, of its many ills like casteism, untouchability, orthodoxy, priestcraft and so on. The debt of gratitude that the Ramakrishnaites of Kerala owe to Tulasi Maharaj is immense, for no other sanyasin, Keralite or non-Keralite, has done half as much to enlighten the people with the true teachings of religion. Like the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, he too was a Bengali by birth, and yet, true to his words, "My heart is in Kerala..... that is my place", he laboured lovingly and long for Kerala and showered all his spiritual wealth on her, wanting nothing and keeping nothing for himself, except our good at heart.

Not satisfied with what he has given us all through his life, he continues to bless us with his eternal presence on the soil of Kerala where he chose to have his final resting place. It is well worth remembering that Swami Nirmalanandaji Maharaj is the only disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who has entered *mahāsamādhi* this side of the Vindhya. And he has made the holy *Bharatappuzha* holier with his *saṁadhi* on her banks. It is said that worship of Lord Vishnu becomes complete only with the offering of *tulasi* leaves at His lotus feet. Here in Kerala, worship of Gaya-Vishnu Sri



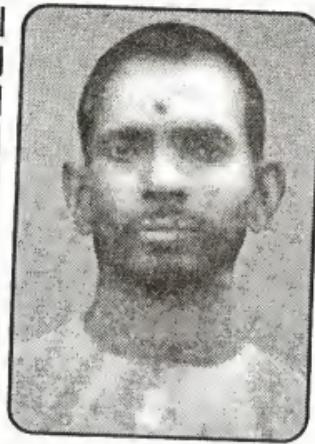
Ramakrishna becomes complete only when it begins and ends with worshipful remembrance of 'Sri Ramakrishna-Tulasi', Swami Nirmalanandaji Maharaj.

NIRANJAN ASHRAMA : Sri Ramakrishna Niranjan Ashrama, Sri Ramakrishna Nagar, Ottapalam has the unique distinction of having been the favourite ashrama of Tulasi Maharaj. It was here that he spent the last two years (1936-'38) of his holy life and chose to make it his final resting place. This ashrama, named after Swami Niranjananandaji Maharaj, one of the *Iswarakoti* disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, was established on 10th December 1926. It may be mentioned here in passing that Kerala is the only state in India where *ashramas* are named after the *Iswarakotis*: Brahmananda Ashrama, Thiruvananthapuram and Kayamkulam; Yogananda Ashrama, Alappuzha; Premananda Ashrama, Muttom and Niranjan Ashrama, Ottapalam. This was how Niranjan Ashrama came to be established:

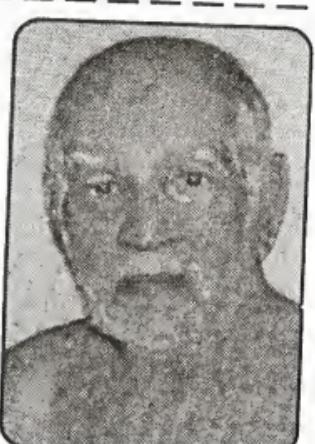
In the small town of Ottapalam, a Vedanta Society with Sri. V.K. Narayanan Nair as its President has been functioning from early 1990s. Weekly meetings and observing important Hindu holy days with *puja, bhajan* and readings from the scriptures used to be its programme of activities. By about 1910, Sri Ramakrishna Jayanthi also came to be celebrated. The Jayanthi celebration of 1913 was a memorable event, for Swami Sharvananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and President of the Ramakrishna Math, Madras was the main speaker at the Public meeting. That was a novel experience for the members of the Society, for it was the first time that they had heard a modern Swami



Swami Nirmalanandaji Maharaj



Swami Sukhanandaji



Swami Amalanandaji



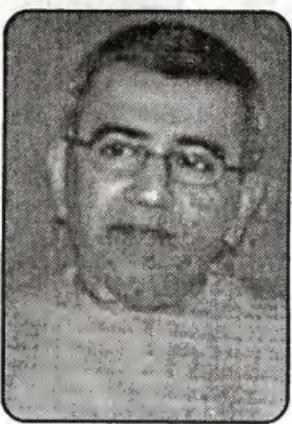
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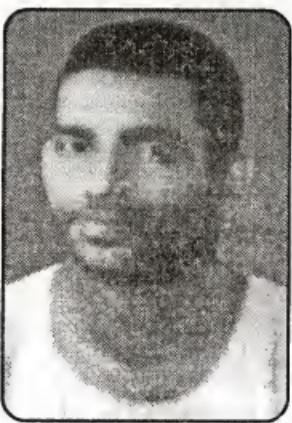
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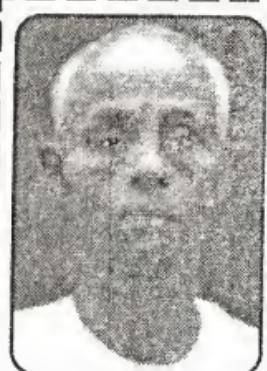
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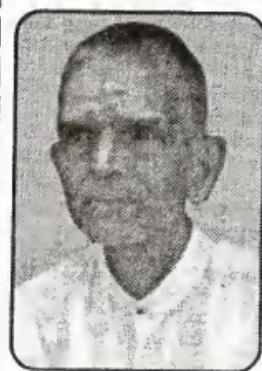
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Namboothiri



A.K.T.K.M.
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K.P. Parukkutty
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Ottoor
Subrahmanyam
Namboothiripad



Sub-Judge
T.V. Krishnan Nair



speaking in English on the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna with a sense of intimacy and serious urgency.

It had its effect on them, for their desire to see and hear a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna increased several fold. It was at this time that the President of the Society, Sri. V.K. Narayanan Nair chanced to meet his good friend, Sri. T. Kunjirama Menon who was instrumental in inviting Swami Nirmalanandaji Maharaj to Badagara and introducing him to Malabar. Sri. Menon advised his friend to invite Swamiji to visit Ottapalam and stay there as his guest during Swamiji's next visit to Haripad. Accepting "V.K's" invitation, Swamiji blessed Ottapalam with the dust of his holy feet early in March 1914.

The Swamiji conquered the hearts of the devotees by his mere presence, enchanting them with his majestic manliness and spiritual dignity. His talks on Sri Ramakrishna were eloquent and illuminating and enlivened by the parables from the teachings of the Great Master. The devotees, in their turn, endeared themselves to the Swamiji with their simple faith and pure devotion. Thus, the devotees from Ottapalam and its neighbourhood were overjoyed to bask in the sunshine of the Swamiji's holy company for a few days every year. It was about the close of 1924 that they began to think seriously of having a Ramakrishna ashrama in the town whereby they would get the benefit from the Swamiji's extended stay in the ashrama.

Now then, in the village of Palappuram, about two miles north-east of the town, there was a small settlement of Nambudiri families, ostracised under the laws of the cruel custom called *smartha-vichara* which was more tyrannical



than the caste system and untouchability. What hurt them most was that they were barred from entering the temples owned or managed by the orthodox Nabudiris. So, their crying need was to have a temple of their own, for which the well-to-do landlord among them, Sri. A.K.T.K.M. Vasudevan Nambudiripad had already completed the groundwork - the foundation and the platform in granite and a beautiful stone image of Lord Vishnu. It was then that Sri. Kalpakasseri Narayanan Nambudiri, who was a member of the Vedanta Society, came up with the suggestion that a Ramakrishna ashrama and Swami Nirmalanandaji Maharaj's blessings would serve their purpose better than a temple. Accepting the wholesome advice, Sri. Vasudevan Nambudiripad offered the four-acre land to Swamiji for the construction of the ashrama. The Swamiji found the place suitable and was pleased to accept the offering.

The members of the Vedanta Society were quick to point out that the fit place for an ashrama was the town where the devotees supporting the ashrama were both rich and educated-government officials, lawyers, doctors, teachers, merchants etc. To this, the Swamiji's reply was, "Those poor, illiterate rural folks have none of your advantages, and so, it is those people who stand in need of an ashrama more than you. Therefore, let the ashrama be there". On another occasion, the Swamiji made this remark to a devotee, "The piteous cries of there poor people reached the ears of Sri Gurumaharaj. And that is why you have an ashrama here".

This is a *sādhana*-ashrama and not a *seva*-ashrama. Therefore, the ashrama gives importance to *puja, bhajan, japa*,



dhyana, scriptural study and the observance of Hindu holy days like *Navarātri*. Sri Ramakrishna Jayanthi and the Swami Nirmalananda Temple Opening Day used to be celebrated with religious discourses, public meetings, *bhajan*-processions and *daridra-Narayana-puja* or feeding of the poor with a sumptuous feast. For the past two years, the ashrama has been holding a one-day Spiritual Retreat on the fourth or final Sunday of every month of the English calender. The ashrama, situated on the banks of the holy *Bharatappuzha* with its serene atmosphere, is an ideal place for genuine spiritual seekers.

The first President of the ashrama was Swami Sukhanandaji Maharaj who looked after the affairs of the ashrama from 1926 to 1940. For two years from 1940 to 1942, Swami Amalanandaji Maharaj and Swami Sekharanandaji Maharaj were at the helm of affairs. For over four decades from 1942 to 1985, Swami Vishadanandaji Maharaj was the President and it was during his stewardship that the activities of the ashrama were brought into the present system. As in the construction of the Swami Nirmalananda Temple in 1939, so in the publication of the *Life and Teachings of Swami Nirmalananda* in 1943, the important factor was his initiative and guidance. Taking offence at the publication of Swamiji's *Life*, Belur Math disaffiliated and disowned many ashramas founded by the Swamiji and most of his monastic disciples.

Consequently, the disaffiliated ashramas and the Swamis were brought under the organisational umbrella of "The Ramakrishna-Nirmalananda Mandalam" with Niranjan Ashrama as its main centre and Swami Vishadanandaji



Maharaj as its co-ordinator-Secretary. This came into being in 1943 and the swami continued to be the life and light of the Mandalam till his passing away in 1985. In 1948, he founded the Sarada Ashrama in the neighbourhood of the Niranjan Ashrama and admitted as its inmates a few educated women - all of them were "Swamiji's children" - who were inclined to lead a monastic life dedicated to the ideal shown by the Holy Mother. In the same year, he started the monthly organ of the Mandalam, *Tulasee-Sugandham* of which he was the publisher and Chief Editor.

In 1963, the centenary year of Swami Nirmalanandaji Maharaj, he published the *Life* of the Swamiji, *Ramakrishna-Kiranam* in two volumes. He brought out two books in English on spiritual science and divine experience. *Sri Ramakrishna-Bhāgavatam* in Malayalam in the 'Kilippattu' style dealt with the life and teachings of Sri Gurumaharaj. He had written a few short plays based on the life of Sri Ramakrishna and several hymns and devotional songs all of which had one theme - the divine-human play of Sri Ramakrishna. The *Gita-Upanishad* evening class started by Swami Amalanandaji Maharaj came up of age by now and it formed a significant part of the daily *sādhana* life till 1950.

Devotees from far and near used to participate in the *Navarātri* celebrations which came to be held on a festive scale from the early '50-s onwards. So also in the daily morning worship and evening meditation classes conducted by the Swami. A few of those who had attended this daily *Bhakta-Mela* came to embrace the monastic life in due course. The Swami gave *sanyāsadeeksha* to 22 inmates of the Niranjan Ashrama and 13 inmates of the Sarada



Ashrama, besides giving *mantra-deeksha* to a large number of devotees and guiding them to the refuge of Sri Ramakrishna. The four decades that Swami Vishadanandaji Maharaj presided over the destiny of the ashrama could justly be described as the Golden Era of the ashrama.

To manage the affairs of the ashrama following in the footsteps of a such a great Swami as Swami Vishadanandaji Maharaj was anything but easy. Yet, for two decades from 1985 to 2005, the daunting task of running the ashrama was ably undertaken by his disciples, Swami Dheeranandaji Maharaj and Swami Nischalanandaji Maharaj. The present president is Swami Kaivalyanandaji Maharaj, another disciple of Swami Vishadanandaji Maharaj. It is hoped that with the grace and blessings of Sri Ramakrishna as well as the continued co-operation and support of the devotees, the ashrama will be of service to the spiritual aspirants in an ever-increasing measure in days to come.

Jai Ramakrishna !

Ottapalam,
25.12.2008



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